



THE SECRET JOY OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Self-accountability as a Building Block for Change

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The domestic violence movement has claimed many victories. Through decades of tireless work, we've drawn increased mainstream attention to victim-blaming, and dramatically changed the way society views survivors of domestic violence. But in our ongoing quest for legitimacy and safety for survivors, the domestic violence movement has too often boiled complex concepts down to easily digestible one-liners. Many activists and other members of my communities imagine survivors of domestic violence as perfect angels who can do no wrong; we think of every action they've ever taken as noble and necessary. When tackling such a complex, difficult problem in what remains such a hostile climate, it is understandable that organizers might reach for a "simplifying" logic that states: If survivors are perfect, then people who batter are evil monsters, barely human. This binary allows us to think of batterers as people

who exist somewhere else, in fantasy and stories but not in our lives, communities, and homes. Our fear of what surviving really means compels us to grossly oversimplify the experiences of both survivors and people who batter. Put on the defensive, we react to victim-blaming—like “it’s all your fault” and “she was asking for it”—by drawing borders around who we think survivors are (and are not). We’re careful not to let in any scary, wicked, nasty words. By creating systems that can’t hold complexity, we are unable to see all the things survivors do in the context of surviving abuse. These things aren’t always beautiful and noble. And we’re killing each other by not talking about it.

The term “survivor” is only effective as long as it serves me. Sometimes I cling to the term because it describes the hurt and hiding. It’s a tool to get to the bottom of a relationship that brought me to my knees. It’s helpful because sometimes I find healing in the words of others who call themselves survivors. The word survivor means a thousand things I can’t claim; it’s perfectly imperfect and I want that to be ok. What I need the word *survivor* to be is a placeholder, a shortcut to say all the things I’ll never get to say. It’s a tool to get inside and understand all of the moments of choice that came together and brought down my world: the times I went back, over and over again, how I gave away every part of myself while chasing a story I made up about my life.

Working with LGBT survivors of domestic violence at The Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse (NW Network), there are times I hear someone else’s story and remember what it felt like to be in the thick of it. What I don’t know how to tell you is there are times when I hear a survivor’s story with moments so much like the ones I remember that it takes my breath away. Sometimes when I hear myself explaining the insanity that I lived in, I immediately want to diminish what happened, pretend it was different than it was. I explain it away because I don’t want to be the person who lived like that.

I’m still trying to call back the two halves of the person who loved him: the person who felt understood, cared for, and loved, and the person who feared him, who watched around every corner, feared every party, whose

heart would skip a beat every time a dark German-made car came into view. What I’m scared to tell you is that I moved in with him even after the worst of it. We got back together after months of panic attacks, failed attempts at sharing space, and crazy-making negotiations. There are short, simple phrases to tell you what it was like, but the reality encompasses so many nuances that feel impossible to explain.

Relationships are made of tiny moments of intention and choice.¹ I reached my own bottom through all these tiny moments strung together until they became something bigger than me, something I was so inside of that I couldn’t see. Sometimes I’ll tell myself it wasn’t that bad—the kind of fucked-up relationship that people are in sometimes, but not abusive. Hardest to explain is how nothing was shocking; each insane reality made sense at the time. I loved getting his 2:00 a.m. text messages; it felt normal to be available to him any time day or night. At one point I promised my friends and myself that we wouldn’t get back together, but after a 3:00 a.m. phone call with him driving drunk to my house—there we were in bed again. Every time things fell apart and I was willing to walk away, I was offered the next thing I never thought I’d get. I could never explain how it happened. It was daily chaos every time I agreed to do something I knew I couldn’t, such as having sex with other people or accepting the ongoing intimacy between him and his ex. I twisted and bent myself into a person who could become someone I wasn’t. I did things that weren’t consistent with the person I wanted to be in the world.

The last time we were together, I went back because it felt like I could undo the pain caused by months of not speaking, tense negotiations, and uncomfortable fights over community spaces. I didn’t want to fight, struggle and brood anymore. I wanted to find a way of being together without either one of us compromising ourselves. I thought I wouldn’t have to feel so bad inside if I just tried a little harder. There are still moments I want to call him hope that we could just talk it out and make it right between us, that we could just learn how to be ok with each other. This is the trap it feels like I’ll always be running from. Sometimes it feels like I can never completely let

this relationship go because that's just the moment he'll come back into my life. When I finally decide to put it all behind me, just when I'm feeling like it's truly over—that's when the phone will ring, and before I know it we've exchanged hours of I'm sorry's and I love you's. And there I'll be, right back in the same pattern I was trying to escape.

It's easier to tell you what he did and harder to tell you what I did. It's harder to tell you about the times I lied to him. It's harder to tell you about the panic attacks or moments when I just couldn't fight anymore. I'm afraid that if I tell you the whole story, the extent of the devastation will, paradoxically, get lost. I'm afraid I'll tell the wrong story. I'm afraid that I can never explain just what it was like; that if I do a bad job of sharing my whole truth, then it'll be like I'm lying and all of this healing work will have been for nothing. I'm afraid my story isn't the story you want to hear. I'm afraid to say that my healing means taking responsibility for the fucked-up things I did because then I'm not the survivor everyone wants me to be.

In the years since this relationship ended I've dramatically changed the way I talk about it. I used to tell the story over and over again to anyone who would listen, the story of all of the things *he* did to *me*. This story was important but it was also devastating. Every time I told the story it was self-soothing and restimulating; it allowed me to constantly relive all of the pain and drama I experienced. This story of the horrible ex served me in so many ways: it helped me rally support, it helped me feel sorry for myself, it helped me break up with him, and it helped me move him out of my life bit by bit. But what that story never did was help me heal. The old story kept me stuck, trapped in old patterns that weren't serving me anymore. I had to change the story I told. Gradually, I took some distance from dramatic stories of the horrible things he did to me and started looking at ways I could take responsibility for my actions. This was hard at first because I had surrounded myself with people who told me that I was justified in my actions. His dramatic ups and downs served me in that I didn't have to examine the ways that I was afraid all of the time; I didn't have to look at the ways that intimacy deeply frightened me. All of the drama kept us just far enough away from each other

that we never had to be truly intimate with one another. Focusing on him kept me trapped and made me feel like there was nothing different I could have done to change what happened in our relationship. When I started focusing on the things I did in the course of surviving that weren't in line with who I want to be, the part of me that was obsessed with our relationship, and closed off in that way, started to open up and I began figuring out who I was outside of this relationship.

In the course of surviving, I cried a lot. In the course of surviving, I lied, manipulated, invaded my partner's privacy. In the course of surviving, I hurt and put in harm's way my friends, my communities, my partner, myself. In the course of surviving, I hurt my family connections. In the course of surviving, I drank. In the course of surviving, I dated, kissed, and slept with people I did not treat very well.

In my process of healing, the question I keep coming back to is this: What would it look like to take responsibility for the complex choices I made in a grounded, centered, and accountable way? Where are the places I can talk about choices in a manner that contextualizes them within systems of violence? It's not enough to tell me that I had no choice. Time after time, survivors are told *you had no choice; you did what you needed to do to survive*. Survival is resiliency, and it is necessary. But survival is not without cost. We make choices within a system that's meant to turn a powerful person who can act and make choices on their own behalf into someone who becomes an object and is acted upon. People are always resisting objectification. They are fighting, pushing, screaming to be people who can act for themselves. Sometimes we fight and we scream and we push against the edges of the things that are holding us, and sometimes in the course of trying to be who we are in the world, we do things we never thought we would.

Domestic violence is a pattern of power and control that by design limits survivors' choices. But even within this pattern, survivors make a million little choices everyday. Recognizing these choices is an essential step toward creating a different life for ourselves. The solution to breaking a pattern of power and control that limits choices lies in an increased ability to act powerfully

and make choices on your own behalf. In domestic violence movements we call this ability to make choices *agency*. Agency and self-determination encompass all of the beautiful ways we honor ourselves, as well as the choices we make that pull us further away from who we want to be. Choosing to go back can be one form of self-determination. And, so often for survivors, self-determination means choosing the less awful of two shitty choices.

If we can't grasp that survivors are people who make choices, then we incorrectly name some of the things they do as battering. Nothing frightens me more. We have to understand domestic violence as a pattern of power and control that governs the entire relationship. For survivors, this pattern of power and control is experienced in all the ways their world gets smaller and their choices are limited, but also in all the good times when they love their partner more than they can stand. These dynamics work in conjunction with each other, and together they keep people invested and make it that much harder to change. This pattern of power and control encompasses all of the moments of violence and love that pull together to weigh people down. There is no one behavior that can tell us who is surviving and who is battering in a particular relationship. To decide whether a relationship is abusive or not, we must look at the entire picture created by all those moments of intention and choice. Without this big picture, it's far too easy to look at one choice by one person and mistakenly believe we know what's going on.

There are few places in which this understanding of the larger context is more important than in queer and trans communities. The system of sexism privileges men's power over women, producing an environment in which, in a heterosexual context, it is overwhelmingly men who batter women. Because of homophobia, transphobia, and sexism, gender becomes a much less reliable tool in queer and trans communities for evaluating who is battering, and who is surviving in relationships. This added complexity has pushed our queer and trans communities to find other ways to suss this out. At the NW Network, people have worked over the years to develop powerful tools for holding this complexity. What we have come to learn is that a process of open questions and information-gathering does not only help queer and trans

folks in abusive relationships but that it can be helpful to everyone struggling in their relationships to step back and look at larger dynamics.

When thinking about how we can respond to violence within our communities without using the institutions that are set up to mess with us, it's essential we understand the context in which people are making their choices. It's amazing to see all the ways that social justice activists are imagining to respond to violence within our communities. Where I think we need help is in the *application* of our innovative and brilliant notions. We need to build the capacity within our movements to respond to violence, and I believe that work begins with building *our own internal capacity* to look at and be responsible for our choices. Among the frameworks my queer and trans communities have used in response to violence are community accountability models. In their simplest form, community accountability models strive to address violence using community-centered responses based outside of the state's criminal legal system. Where I think our community accountability models have missed the mark is in our desire to rush into action. In our visioning, we have confused our desire to have communities with the skills and knowledge to respond to violence with the reality that most of us are walking around with a dearth of accountability skills. In other words, I think we've gotten ahead of ourselves. We've started to think of community accountability models as services the anti-violence movement might provide rather than as a set of internal skills we are all working to build with the goal of creating the conditions necessary for loving equitable relationships.

In my observation, we fall short each time we've tried to apply our beautiful notions of community accountability to our daily realities. I don't think this is because it's impossible to engage in a structured accountability process but because we haven't spent the time building our individual skill sets to help us reach this goal. Think how far forward our movements would be if everyone got just 25% better at taking responsibility for their actions. I understand the impulse to swift reaction because people are in abusive relationships right now; if we don't act immediately, we feel like we're failing the people we love. So we've often rushed to solutions while trying to find ways to hold people

who batter accountable. Sometimes I think we want to swoop in and be the hero. But urgency isn't serving us in this goal. In the face of crisis we have to find the time to pause and reflect; otherwise we'll remain trapped in these same cycles of violence. In that reflection lie answers, and further clarifying questions, that will help us learn how to respond to these challenges from a more centered and emotionally-resourced place.

Community accountability models raise many challenging questions: Whom do we want to be held accountable? And what do we want them to be accountable for? Too often I've seen people ready to jump in headfirst and try holding someone who is battering accountable. Only later, they realize that the process isn't what they thought it would be. Sometimes the story shifts and changes, and suddenly what we thought we knew may make no sense at all. We have the potential to do a lot of harm with partial information. I'm cautious about using community accountability models—not because I think they're impossible but because I don't think we're there yet. We are still building the skills we need to engage in this work, and first and foremost among these skills is learning how to engage in our own process of self-accountability.

In the process of exploring community accountability models we often come to the following question: What do we do with people who perpetrate violence? To engage in a process of holding people who batter accountable, we must understand who batterers are. Something we often don't understand about batterers is that they're people. Most often they're hurt people who have almost no support in taking responsibility for their actions; they are also people often determined to avoid taking responsibility for their actions by nearly any means. People who batter are scared. People who batter often believe down to their very core that they are the ones being harmed. Many batterers believe that the world is out to get them and that no one could ever understand. People who batter are also very persuasive when it comes to convincing others that these beliefs are true. Batterers are people skilled at messing with others and exploiting vulnerabilities.

Among the most compelling things I learned while working at the NW Network was how people who batter can use their own real and perceived

vulnerabilities to set up and maintain patterns of power and control. One of the myths of battering is that people who batter are all-powerful villains who both are and feel themselves to be strong and capable. Due in part to mainstream understandings of domestic violence, we typically equate battering with privilege. We've seen heterosexual men utilize male privilege to batter women, and again we've boiled down a complex set of dynamics to a simple idea: men batter women. While the idea that batterers are people with privilege is based on a type of battering that does exist, I've often seen queer and trans survivors of domestic violence struggle to reconcile this assumption with their own reality, in which the person who battered them claims one of any number of marginalized identities. Frequently we hear batterers say, "I have a disability so I can't batter," "I'm genderqueer so I can't batter," "I'm a person of color so I can't batter." There is no identity that inherently bars people from being batterers—virtually all of us are capable of setting up and maintaining a pattern of power and control.

In my work at the NW Network, I've seen this play out time and time again. For example, a batterer might tell their partner how scary the world is, that because of their trans (or other marginalized) identity the world is not safe for them, and so their partner must help shoulder the weight of this oppression. Batterers who share marginalized identities with their partners can also utilize the vulnerabilities in those shared identities to batter their partners. I've seen this manifest with batterers who exploit the isolation inherent in maintaining oppression to enforce more personal levels of isolation, saying things like "it's you and me against the world," or "no one else can understand you like I do." Perhaps even more insidiously, batterers from activist communities can skillfully yield anti-oppression language to weave an ever-tightening web where, because of the oppression inflicted by the outside world, a person who is surviving must forever do what their abusive partner says. Many survivors who are legitimately trying to be allies to their partners become caught in a trap where no amount of listening or compromising will ever offset the oppression their partner experiences. For social justice activists and people working hard to dismantle intersecting oppressions, this can

be an extremely effective strategy for setting up and maintaining a pattern of power and control.

Survivors, having been taught to take more than their share of blame, often take too much responsibility for the struggles in their relationships. Survivors are hiding, lying, steeped in shame, afraid to tell their friends, families, and support networks the truth because they believe there are things they've done that are too horrible to talk about. For a person who is battering, a survivor's shame and silence is an extremely powerful tool for maintaining power and control. There should never be anything we do that's too shameful to talk about. Shame is our enemy, a ghost that keeps us trapped in all the ways we hurt ourselves and others. I can't tell you the number of survivors I've talked to who believe there is something they've done in the course of surviving for which they can never be let off the hook, something so shameful they believe they deserve to suffer and be unhappy.

What survivors need is support in their own self-determination and safety. What batterers need is support in accountability.² One of the many gifts of my job is talking with brilliant and skilled people about complex topics such as accountability. While doing this work I often hear people ask questions about how they can hold someone else accountable. So often, people jump to an external definition of accountability that is about other people assuming responsibility for their actions rather than imagining accountability as an internal process where each of us examines our own behaviors and choices so that we can better reconcile those choices with our own values. I define (self) accountability as a process of taking responsibility for *your* choices and the consequences of those choices.³ I deeply believe that the skill of self-accountability is one of the fundamental principles we've overlooked in developing community accountability models. In a process of self-accountability, this reconciliation isn't dependent on another person's involvement, but instead engages with our own sense of values and what is important to us. In the work of self-accountability, we are constantly striving to align our actions and our values, knowing it's likely they will never be exactly the same. When there's a gap in that alignment

we can reflect on what choices we would need to make in the future so our actions are more in line with who we want to be.

While I don't think it's possible to hold others accountable, I do think we can create environments that support people in their efforts toward self-accountability. Our work at the NW Network is largely about creating the conditions that make it possible for people to have loving, equitable relationships, built in part on self-determination, support networks, and abundance. That is some of my favorite work. What is the point of devoting so much time and energy to talking about all of the hurts if we're not equally committed to envisioning how our lives and relationships can improve?

I think about how much would have changed if I'd just believed there was enough; if I had understood that love wasn't finite but never-ending, something that is always available to me. What if I had treated sex and the ability to connect as something that's abundant and overflowing? Perceived scarcity is as much to blame for the times I've been wrecked in my life as anything else. I kept going back to this relationship that wasn't working for me in part because of my own internal sense that this was all there was. I believed there would never ever be another mixed Latino queer who would love a fat, mixed Latina femme. I didn't see a community where I was desired, where fat bodies were loved and celebrated, and I didn't know a community that loved and relished fabulous femmes in all of our beautiful, flashy brilliance. I didn't know there were others who would love me as I am. What I knew was a beautiful community that was loving and open but didn't always know how to make space for everyone in it. While working to support all of the amazing masculine queers who were fighting to be seen and to gain safety, we traded in our love for intentional, fierce femininity. We didn't know how to love femininity and femmes.

This community of beautiful, wonderful, radical queer and trans folks also didn't know how to talk about the times we messed up. While trying to be free we were *so often* cutting each other down: community norms tended toward secrecy and gossip. Today I'm able to recognize how the larger community context surrounding my relationship was as important as what happened between the two of us. There weren't people around me whose relationships

I wanted to emulate. It was hard to envision what transparency, good communication, and boundary-setting could look like in radical queer and trans communities when the romantic relationships I saw around me continued to fall very short of the radical theory we were claiming allegiance to. I watched my friends and loved ones struggle through tireless negotiations, and often when someone tried to find new ways of constructing their relationship, they either got exhausted and gave up or simply left the community entirely. I want to create more places where my fellow activists can advance practical applications for all of our visionary ideas.

Healing is like a corkscrew, spiraling forever upwards. There's no end, no final destination, just new tools and understanding as I hit those familiar bumps in the road. My healing has come in waves, and key to that process has been recognizing the choices I made and the choices I have. Beyond recognizing these choices, I am searching for communities that will lovingly support me as I take responsibility for the choices I made in the course of surviving that weren't aligned with my values.

Today my life is so different, and so are my relationships. I left the relationship, and eventually I left the state. I left a community that loves and supports me fiercely because I didn't know how to heal surrounded by the same community-wide conditions that were reinforcing the similarly broken parts of our relationships. So I made the difficult choice to leave in search of other ways of creating loving, equitable relationships in queer and trans communities. What I found in this exploration was a place where femmes are loved and where there are fat queers in every part of my life. I found a place that offered me the space and time to heal. I found a place that was eager to support me in my journey to find ways of relating and loving without the obsessive insanity that had become my second nature. I left with a deep desire to know how to do it differently next time, to talk to my communities and to figure it out.

It feels like we're such babies at this, new and fresh. We're fucking up and stumbling left and right, and that's ok. I know the stakes are high, and it feels

like one slip up can be the difference between life and death. But we have to start from where we are. I want my radical queer and trans communities to understand the violence we do to each other. I want us to understand it using our own words and stories. I want us to find healing in the ways we are doing it better, and I want us to create spaces for healing all around us. I want us to not get ahead of ourselves in our quest for better community engagement models. I want us to build our capacity for complexity and to continue moving beyond the domestic violence movement catch phrases like "you did what you needed to do to survive" and "it's not your fault" that we've relied on for far too long. I want us to stay connected with each other and to practice vigilance during the times our friends fall off the map. I've yet to see a structured community accountability model that I would want to recreate in my life and communities, but at the same time I've also seen so much growth in our movements and in the people around me. I'm excited about creating the conditions for loving each other the very best way we know how—beautifully, fully, and as people who can act powerfully and make choices on our own behalf.

notes

- 1 The Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse, *Relationship Skills Class Curriculum* (forthcoming: 2011), <http://www.nwnetwork.org>.
- 2 Connie Burk, NW Network, *Survivors' Use of Violence Training* (2009).
- 3 NW Network, *Class Curriculum*.